



Master planning – grand designs delivered

Education Today staff



At first glance it would be hard to pin down exactly what Brisbane Grammar School's Lilley Centre might be and that's kind of the idea. With its expanses of smoked glass and steel set against the school's century old brick and sandstone, the Lilley Centre is ambiguous by design, definitions have been blurred, what it can be used for and how that activity is done.

At its core, the centre fulfills the function of a library but does a lot more than that; it houses IT spaces and adaptive areas that can be used for collaborative learning, facilitating pastoral care or simply hanging out. The border areas are designed to be noisy, open and active while a quieter, contemplative space is revealed as one progresses further inside.

It's the kind of surprising, bespoke building

that results from a thorough investigation of a project's form, values and intent during the master planning stage.

Wilson Architects has put a lot of thought and research into the master planning process. For all the firm's projects, the client's values are investigated, the setting, context and history are addressed, from there the firm seeks to crystallise what's been discovered into a coherent, legible idea.



Photos by Christopher Frederick Jones

Hamilton Wilson, Managing Director of Wilson Architects, says that the final form of the Lilley Centre and its location had to be fought for, “Initial thinking was for the facility to be located at the periphery of the school’s site, we wanted it to be both physically and symbolically at the heart of the school.”

The older school buildings were constrained to a didactic way of teaching and the cohort sizes were limited.

“To achieve active learning in the past was a matter of squeezing everybody in. The spaces in the new centre can now be leveraged to accommodate 30, 60 up to 120 students learning flexibly and collaboratively. Learning can also be delivered in a next generation lecture theatre, The Forum, where students can rearrange themselves using the wheeled furniture into smaller groups for discussion.”

“We had thought that the area would

naturally gravitate towards the humanities side but since then it’s been found that it’s great for teaching maths and sciences.”

The spaces were designed to facilitate a more flexible learning community, at a fundamental level rather than as an afterthought, “Brisbane Grammar delivers an education with a whole of student focus to think critically and creatively and we were able to include that front and centre in our considerations for the building’s design. The client wanted the building to reinforce its history as well as better align its ‘dimensions of learning’ framework and it has achieved that,” Wilson says.

This centre has picked up a swag of awards both local and international, it was recognised by the OECD as one of the 60 International Education Facility Exemplars and the centre won the 2010 AIA Qld Award for Public Architecture.

The firm’s master planning principles

have been brought to bear in a second major education project in Brisbane, Brisbane Boys’ College’s Middle School Precinct.

Pedagogy and pastoral care were at the core of considerations for the Precinct’s design, which is underpinned by the number nine, reflecting the nine school houses and nine classes in a year in BBC’s middle school.

The house system is central to BBC’s method of delivering a student centred, attentive way of teaching complemented by pastoral care. As such the rooms in the new buildings needed to be adaptable, so they could be quickly transformed into spaces that could accommodate a house or learning group of around 75.

“This needs to happen quickly, the spaces can be reconfigured in minutes which we’ve made possible through more flexible furniture and technology,” Wilson says.

Some pretty experimental thinking is being

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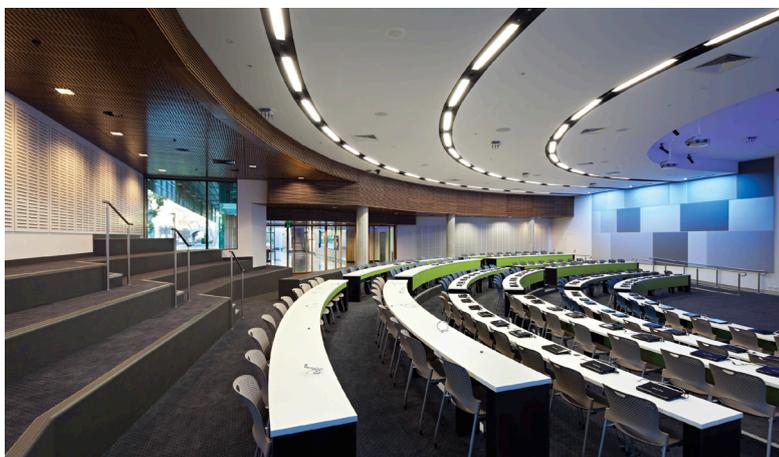
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buildings and grounds



Informal and forum spaces at the Lilley Centre



applied here with a focus on breaking down barriers and opening up a more collaborative, collusive way of teaching.

The facilities have been rethought. Teaching can be a very solitary profession, in bringing transparent walls to the classrooms, teachers and student feel connected to a broader learning landscape, with lines of vision and sound being opened up between the classes.

In many of the rooms the head and back wall transparently open to the outside and are flanked by writeable white-boarded walls and interactive group displays which morphs the type of learning taking place into a looser collaborative process.

“School is where understanding takes place, the reinforcement of that knowledge happens at home where students can down load and revisit the curriculum”, Wilson says.

Donna Payne principal of PMDL’s Melbourne studio says that master planning is valuable process that should be front and centre of every education project. It follows a seven-step method which is designed to be a flexible but formal process which brings together the client’s and architect’s ideas. The master plan is both a document guiding a current project and a plan for its future integration.

In developing master plans, PMDL works with its clients to identify the parameters for the master plan, its timeframe, core brief requirements and outcomes along with identifying key stakeholders and lines of communication.

This is followed by a research phase including demographic and historical data to identify opportunities and potential challenges. What is discovered during research is analysed, leading to the identification of the signature elements of the site and a strong foundation for the study. PMDL then focuses on defining the global ambitions and “big picture” items.

“The brief allows us to explore scenarios with the site based on projected changes. It provides an objective, quantified account of space needs, which we will then review against any existing facilities and existing site planning in developing concept options,” Ms Payne says.

A huge amount of material has typically been produced and that is now collated to form a single common goal – the masterplan. This is followed by a presentation of the plan to the wider school community to share, understand and foster inclusiveness.

Recent work on an established school, Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School

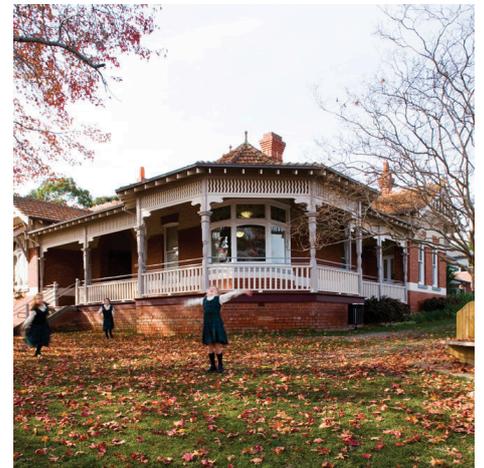
and on a greenfield site, the Islamic College of Melbourne, have pointed to the process’ dynamism when dealing with the challenges of an established site or a completely blank canvas.

“Collaboration with the client is essential, it clarifies intent and gives everyone involved a sense of ownership. Every school is different, it’s a matter of identifying their core values and gaining a thorough understanding of their intentions,” Payne says.

Strathcona’s new Learning Centre is part of a rolling update of its facilities. The project itself is a keystone in terms of the masterplan realising organisational changes to achieve the optimum locations for student learning areas, the integration of staff and support as well as some specialist areas.

The Knowledge Centre on the ground floor of the and with associated support services and the canteen it will unlock the centre of the site and create an active heart for the whole school. The focus remains on developing learning opportunities around a strong pastoral care framework.

“Communication is at the process’ core, it should be focused on clarifying and testing the client’s ideas which are defined in the master



Clockwise: Strathcona's buildings are soon to add a Learning Centre; artist's impression of the Islamic College of Melbourne

planning document. That's not to say that the master plan is static, it changes as circumstances change, a good master plan is more a roadmap than a directive. Clients like Strathcona have been working with us for 10 years or more with the master plan guiding ongoing developments."

Given the green light in 2012 and currently under development, Strathcona's Learning Centre is a facility that contains subtle symbolism while delivering the practicalities of a 21st century learning environment.

The concept is that of a meandering river which reflects a fluid and individual learning experience. The centre has been designed

to support all learning modes, from casual, individual research to group knowledge sharing and 'community' based guided exploration.

By way of contrast, the Islamic College of Melbourne is currently being built from scratch in Tarneit in Melbourne's west. The client was open to ideas for the final concept for the campus and through PMDL's thorough consultation process, should result in an inclusive, welcoming school.

Shared facilities buildings act together to form a protective ring, creating the 'heart' of the school. The design response for the College is aimed at developing a school that responds

to the site through orientation of buildings to the northern aspect, provides protection from prevailing winds, and to a scale that won't jar with existing and future neighbouring buildings.

"In a lot of ways you are looking at to create a little village when designing a school, private spaces and open areas, interplay to create an overall learning experience."

"Much of the process is about identifying the vision that's driving a project. It's fine to have an idea but the practicalities of a building project need have deep consideration, the ideas have to be achievable." Payne says.

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